

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE TWO-HUNDREDTH SUBMISSION

EIGHT years ago Courtney Ryley Cooper, who is a firm believer in turning out quantity as well as quality in the writing game, was injured in an automobile accident, and sentenced to remain in bed for the better part of six weeks.

Time passed slowly, and Cooper called in a stenographer and began to dictate a story to her—a rambling tale which, in length, eventually became a novelette. It had little merit, Cooper thought. He was in poor physical trim, which also meant that his mind was hardly in shape to create literary masterpieces. But the task helped to pass away the dreary, bedridden hours.

When he had sufficiently recovered, he took a trip to Chicago, carrying the manuscript with him. He called on an agent and left it, then promptly forgot it and proceeded to write more stories.

A few weeks ago—eight years afterward—Cooper made another trip to Chicago on business. He dropped in to see the agent.

"By the way," he said, "whatever became of that novelette I left with you in 1912?"

"I'm still sending it around," replied the agent. "Look here."

He opened his desk and displayed the card, showing that the story had been out more than 200 times.

"Street and Smith have it now, you see," he remarked. "This is its third trip to them."

Cooper was impressed. "You deserve something for your persistency," he said. "If you ever sell this yarn, I'll give you, instead of the customary commission, half of what you get."

Scarcely had Cooper returned to his home, in Denver, when he received a letter from the agent. A check for \$225 dropped out.

"Top Notch took the novelette at \$450," the letter explained. "Here is your half."

If Cooper had sent that story around himself, with equal persistence, the result would have been the same. Sooner or later an editor would have bought it. He would have been out about \$50 for postage; but he would have had \$400 clear for his efforts.

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Walt Mason, the genial and highly popular poet-laureate of Kansas, is an indefatigable worker and a firm believer in the efficacy of persistent submissions of manuscripts. He writes one prose poem a day for the George Matthews Adams syndicate, besides numerous other pieces of verse for various magazines. He is a humorist whose editorials and articles are in such keen demand that he makes more than \$1,500 a month with his typewriter.

"Keep 'em in the mails," is Mason's slogan. "Maybe they won't sell; but it's absolutely certain that they won't if they lie in your desk. Keep 'em going."

It should be noted, however, that persistent submissions will have little appreciable result unless the author continues to grind out work. The merchant does a paying business largely through having on his shelves a complete stock of goods, to which he is constantly adding. The writer-merchant must do likewise if he is to be successful. Constant work not only keeps his shelves full, but keeps him in practice and helps to improve the quality of his output. The writer is both manufacturer and salesman of his product.

No story that is the best the author can produce should be withdrawn from the mails with less than ten submissions; and there are countless cases on record of stories that sold after twenty-five, thirty, or even a larger number of trips.

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BUILDING THE NOVELETTE

BY W. C. MORROW

Author of "A Man: His Mark," "Lentalla," etc.

THE novelette of fifteen thousand to thirty thousand words is always in demand, especially if the keynote be adventure.

A good story of that sort combines the following leading elements: Steady, uninterrupted progress, without undue hurry; a genial spirit of leisureliness, without waste of time or of words; usually, a girl thrown into the focus almost or quite at the start, and a man who might become her lover; considerable local color; pleasing characters; a mystery that is not solved until the last, and that apparently is impossible of solution; much courage and daring, and recklessness on the part of men. The handling of such a story is a somewhat rigid matter, for the reason that absolute continuity is of the essence of the interest centering in it. That is largely because such stories are essentially artificial, and hidden artifice must be employed at every step to keep the reader from feverish excitement at one extreme, and impatience over digressions and non-essentials at the other. In a story of this order nothing is permissible but the story itself; and we must begin telling it at once, and keep on telling it.

The very soul of a story lies in keeping the plot constantly evolving. There should never be a halt. The philosophy of it is very simple. The reader becomes interested in the destinies of the central characters. When they are laid aside and something entirely foreign to their destiny is introduced, the reader has to suffer a violent wrench in readjusting his point of view, abandoning his original interest, and building up a new one. Later on, again, he has to revive his original interest.

Our great school for fiction is the drama. On the stage the play moves forward all the time; nothing is admitted that detracts from the central interest, or that diverts the auditor's interest by violent means into new channels, merely for the purpose of making the play sufficiently long. Just as it is with the dramatist, so it is with the novelist. The great problem with both is, not to be put to invent material sufficient to give the work its length, but what of all the matter presenting itself can be best omitted to hold the story down to the proper length. Unless we find ourselves in that dilemma—unless we are compelled, in holding our work to a proper length, to employ a selective sense in culling—we may know that we are not yet sufficiently developed in resourcefulness, that our invention still needs higher training.

The story is, of course, the principal thing. There are writers who yield to temptation to use the story as a vehicle for describing queer things in a foreign country, instead of using the queer things

in the foreign country merely as implements for the forwarding and development of the story. The only purpose that the setting properly serves is to assist the story. It is merely an accessory, as are the characters, the dialogue, the situations, the scenes, the pictures and all the rest. It is *the story* that we want, first, last and all the time.

Unless you have already given very long and thoughtful study to the principles of fiction and the drama, you may not be able to grasp this fundamental truth all at once; time and thought will be required. No possible situation in which you can place your story should be as interesting as the story itself. If the situation is given preference over the story, the story is ruined. Not only is it bad art to make the story subsidiary to the scene in which it is placed, but worse, such treatment makes even a good story dull. What do readers most skip? Description. They are bored by extraneous matter introduced to show that the writer knows where he has been. They want humanity.

Language has severe limitations in rousing emotions, and in descriptions of unfamiliar things these limitations are most insistent. Atmosphere is about all we can hope to accomplish in embodying such a task in our fiction. And atmosphere is a very delicate and elusive quantity. Be assured that not all the wonders and beauties of foreign scenes could possibly prove as interesting on paper as the simplest human story, with a crossroads blacksmith shop for a setting. This is the foundation principle of fiction.

Not that a story should lack local color. But even within bounds widely set, there is room for an author's exercise of taste and judgment and conscience. Every effort that an author makes to display his special knowledge on any subject is a surrender of his subjectivity, and a thrusting forward of his personality between his reader and the story. Nothing could be a worse mistake than that. The author's first duty is to create a perfect illusion. The illusion is the working out of a problem of the heart. The moment the operator of Punch and Judy arises above the little proscenium and shows his deft hands working the figures, the illusion falls to the ground. It is the illusion that we are going to pay the nickel for. To bury himself in his characters is the author's one hope for a profitable issue. To play the showman—meaning to show himself off—is his certain defeat.

A long story is radically defective unless there is a close interlocking of the interests of the characters. The interests of each character should affect the interests of as many other of the characters as possible. That was the master art of the two greatest story-tellers, Dickens and Dumas. The interweaving that they did was amazing. The philosophy involved in it, on the score of interest, is so obvious that it requires no discussion.

The reader resents the nonfulfillment of his expectations. This is a different thing from his hopes. Of course he always wants the hero and heroine to marry at the end, and it is usually best for the author to make it so; but an unusual combination of circumstances may make such a termination illogical, or not the best logic available.

That opens up another important subject. One of the deepest principles in human nature is a groping for ideals. The best fiction is that which reaches and touches that latent sense. We like to read about people of nobility of character. This is the fiction-writer's hint: Never fear to idealize character.

Remember that a heart-thing is worth a thousand eye-things or brain-things. That is because the heart alone is able to make the vital revelation; it is the only possible power that is able to reach the sympathy. So long as you write from the head, you will miss the high mark. When you hold yourself under the lash of non-essentials, you mistake the false for the true, overlook the revelation for the mask of "make-believe." How to make all the elements of a story center in a simple heart-scheme is the story-writer's eternal problem. Build your stories on simple lines—and take them from your heart.

Here is a recipe for brain-activity: Ambition. If that be genuine and have a high aim, the task will be to do as little work as is compatible with good work. No work done with the right aim is real work; it is only play, as all good work must be.

Drudgery is work that does not come from the best part of us. Writing is only self-expression. It is imperatively required that we express the best of ourselves. Good writing should be the surplus of our living—the overflow. We can so develop the inside of us that it must run over and spill upon other people.

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It is not necessary that the work be completed within a year's time, or any specified period, though we have found that students who work regularly and uninterruptedly make best progress. The course is adapted to the individual needs of the student. Naturally a beginner will require assignments, assistance, and suggestions differing from those needed by the writer of experience.

Write for details.

Address The Student-Writer, 1835 Champa Street, Denver, Colo.

EIGHT FACTORS OF LITERARY SUCCESS

By Jack London.

(The following suggestions, which had but a limited circulation during Jack London's life, are worthy of being given to Student-Writer readers.)

IN ANSWER to questions regarding the greatest factors of my literary success, I may state that I consider these to be:

Vast good luck. Good health; good brain; good mental and muscular correlation. Poverty. Reading Ouida's "Signa" when I was eight years of age. The influence of Herbert Spencer's "Philosophy of Style." Getting started twenty years before the fellows who are trying to start today.

Because of all the foregoing, I have been *real*, and did not cheat reality any step of the way, even in so microscopically small, and cosmically ludicrous, a detail as the wearing of a starched collar when it would have hurt my neck had I worn it.

My health was good—in spite of every liberty I took with it—because I was born with a strong body, and lived an open-air life, rough, hard, exercising.

I came of old American stock, of English and Welsh descent, but living in America for long before the French and Indian wars. This accounts for my decent brain.

Poverty made me hustle. My vast good luck prevented poverty from destroying me. Nearly all my oyster-pirate comrades are long since hanged, shot, drowned, killed by disease, or are spending their declining years in prison. Any one of all these things might have happened to me before I was seventeen—save for my vast good luck.

Read Ouida's "Signa." The story begins: "It was only a little lad." The little lad was an Italian mountain peasant. He became an artist, with all Italy at his feet. When I read it, I was a little peasant on a poor California ranch. Reading the story, my narrow hill-horizon was pushed back, and all the world was made possible if I would dare it. I dared.

Read "Philosophy of Style." It taught me the subtle and manifold operations necessary to transmute thought, beauty, sensation and emotion into black symbols on white paper; which symbols, through the reader's eye, were taken into his brain, and by his brain transmuted into thoughts, beauty, sensations and emotions that fairly corresponded with mine. Among other things, this taught me to *know* the brain of my reader, in order to select the symbols that would compel his brain to realize my thought, or vision, or emotion. Also, I learned that the right symbols were the ones that would require the expenditure of the minimum of my reader's brain energy,

leaving the maximum of his brain energy to realize and enjoy the content of my mind, as conveyed to his mind.

A word as to the writer of today:

For one clever writer twenty years ago, there are, today, five hundred clever writers. Today, excellent writing is swamped in a sea of excellent writing. Or so it seems to me.

(To these suggestions may well be appended a quotation from articles contributed to *The Occident* not long before Jack London's death.)

Let me give a few painfully acquired generalizations. Don't quit your job in order to write unless there is none dependent upon you. Fiction pays best of all, and when it is of a fair quality, is more easily sold. Avoid the unhappy ending, the harsh, the brutal, the tragic, the horrible—if you care to see in print the things you write. (In this connection don't do as I *do*, but do as I *say*.)

Don't dash off a six-thousand-word story before breakfast. Don't write too much. Concentrate on one story, rather than dissipate over a dozen. Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club; and if you don't get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it. Set yourself a "stint," and see that you do that "stint" each day; you will have more words to your credit at the end of the year.

Study the tricks of writers who have arrived. They have mastered the tools with which you are cutting your fingers. They are doing things, and their work bears the internal evidence of how it is done. Don't wait for some good Samaritan to tell you, but dig it out for yourself.

Keep a notebook. Travel with it, eat with it, sleep with it. Slap into it every stray thought that flutters into your brain. Cheap paper is less perishable than gray matter, and lead pencil markings endure longer than memory.

And work. Spell it in capital letters. WORK. WORK all the time. Find out about this earth, this universe; this force and matter, and the spirit that glimmers up through force from the maggots to Godhead. And by all this I mean WORK.

The great things are: WORK, and a PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE.

BARGAIN OFFER

Purchased individually, the bound volume sets of *The Student-Writer* for 1917, 1918 and 1919, at \$2.00 each, would cost \$6.00; "Helps for Student-Writers," \$1.00; a year's subscription to *The Student-Writer*, beginning with January, 1920, 50 cents; a copy of "The Handy Market List," 25 cents—total \$7.75.

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The chapters on plot building, viewpoint, style, unity, suspense, characterization, and other phases of short-story building contain information and hints that writers will search for vainly in other textbooks.

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